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Trends in language choice and effects of choice on acquisition: Kaqchikel Maya and Spanish in central Guatemala

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Temple University

Abstract: This study reveals trends in the choice of Kaqchikel Maya, Spanish, or both languages for household activities and by the generations, that is, the children, parents, and grandparents, in a village and a town in the central highlands of Guatemala. Similarities and differences between the village and town are described in both cases. The study also highlights the direct relationship between the language choice of parents and the acquisition of Kaqchikel by children. A total of 171 indigenous residents in the town and the village participated in the study. Findings are based on responses to a sociolinguistic questionnaire that also included measures of knowledge of Kaqchikel. Interviews were conducted by the authors working with bilingual Spanish and Kaqchikel Maya speaking assistants. The measures of knowledge of Kaqchikel were created by the bilingual assistants. The conclusion of this study includes discussion of limitations of current policies for promoting the Kaqchikel language through the education system and broadcasting media

Key words: Kaqchikel, education, linguistics, language policy, language loss

Introduction

This study is based on field research in two communities, the village of Parrojas and the town of Parramos, in the Municipality of Parramos in the department of Chimaltenango in the central highlands of Guatemala. The field research has examined aspects of contact between Kaqchikel Maya and Spanish, including language choice. The results presented here focus on the indigenous population in the town and the village. They reveal trends in the choice of Kaqchikel Maya, Spanish, or both Kaqchikel and Spanish for household activities and by family members in the home. The study also highlights the direct relationship between language choice by parents and the acquisition of Kaqchikel by children. The conclusion includes discussion of limitations of current policies for promoting the Kaqchikel language through the education system and broadcasting media.

The town of Parramos (population 13,754; Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2012) is located 18 kilometers from the city of Antigua and 8 kilometers from the regional capital, the city of Chimaltenango. It is a center of commerce focusing on the cultivation and national and

* Author biographies are located at the end of the article.

international marketing of coffee, black beans, flowers, and garden produce. The village of Parrojas (population 750; Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2012) is the largest and highest village in the mountains overlooking the town. Industries in Parrojas focus on the cultivation of corn, beans, and vegetables for self-consumption and sale in the markets of Chimaltenango, Antigua, and Parramos, and on weaving to produce cloth and articles of clothing for the same markets. The town and the surrounding villages were a center of violence, particularly in the 1980s, during the armed conflict that ended with the Peace Accords of 1996. During the armed conflict, Parrojas was virtually abandoned. It has since been repopulated by returning residents and “kaqchikeles” from other communities of the region.

Verdugo de Lima (2003) places Kaqchikel among the four most spoken of Guatemala’s 22 Mayan languages. It is spoken by approximately 475,000 people in an area of the central highlands stretching from the city of Antigua to Lake Atitlán. In Guatemala, Spanish is the official language and also the language of instruction in most schools at all levels. However, in 2005 for the first time Kaqchikel and the other three most widely spoken Mayan languages (K’iche’, Q’eqchi’, and Mam) became subjects in the national school curriculum in the schools of their corresponding geographical regions (www.mineduc.gob.gt). Kaqchikel is not on UNESCO’s list of endangered languages (www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/index), however, England (1998:99) suggests that all Mayan languages must certainly be counted among the world’s endangered languages, because of growing signs of language shift, especially among the younger generations.

Previous Studies

Kaqchikel Maya and Spanish contact have been the subject of a number of studies. In her study of the then remote community of San Marcos La Laguna, Becker Richards (1998) comments on a frustrated and failed attempt in the mid 1970’s to bring in a *promotor bilingüe* ‘bilingual promoter’ to ease the transition from Kaqchikel at home to Spanish in school; she comments as well as on parents’ skepticism about instruction in the vernacular in school because they had sent their children to school to learn Spanish. In her study of the heavily indigenous community of Comalapa, located some 25 kilometers higher in the highlands from Parramos, Garzon (1998) describes a situation in the late 1980’s in which Kaqchikel and Spanish bilingualism had spread considerably in comparison to that described by Farber (1978) for the same community. In his study of adults in the community of San Antonio Aguas Calientes near the city of Antigua in the 1980’s, McKenna Brown (1998) describes a situation of shift in which only approximately 40% of the indigenous adults describe their knowledge of Kaqchikel as good. McKenna Brown cites Annis (1987:28) in a study of children in that community, which states that “none of the present group of one-to four-year-olds were learning Kaqchikel as their first language ...” Most recently, Jandrey Hertel and Barnes (2020) examine subjects’ statements about use and attitudes toward Kaqchikel and Spanish in San Marcos La Laguna. They highlight attitudes assigning Spanish value for commerce and education, in contrast to ascriptions of value to Kaqchikel for ethnic identity and social cohesion.

Methods

The authors of the present study are the principal investigators for the overall project examining contact between Kaqchikel Maya and Spanish of which this study is a part. Much of the fieldwork was carried out between 2011 and 2016, but we began to visit the municipality of Parramos in 2002 and we continue to visit each year. We have worked with four bilingual assistants, Kaqchikel and Spanish speakers, two from the town of Parramos and two from the village of Parrojas.

A total of 280 community members from the town and village participated in our project. They are distributed as is seen below for ethnicity of the total participant group and for ethnicity in the village and in the town.

Participant Sample		
<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Ethnicity Village</u>	<u>Ethnicity in the Town</u>
Indígenas: 171	Indígenas: 79	Indígenas: 92
Ladinos: 109	Ladinos: 2	Ladinos: 107

One hundred and seventy-nine individuals who self-identified as indigenous, or ‘indígena’, participated in the study. Seventy-nine are from the village of Parrojas or from two other nearby villages in the case of some of the students in the village sample. Only two young students in the village sample self-identified as ‘ladino’, or not indigenous, reflecting the fact that the villagers are almost exclusively indigenous. Also, reflecting the fact that the indigenous participants from the town live in a community with a large ‘ladino’ population, the 92 participants from the town of Parramos who declared as ‘indígena’ are 46% of the sample from the town.

We interviewed each participant using a sociolinguistic questionnaire. Working separately, one of the authors directed the conversation, always with the help of one of our bilingual assistants. The questionnaire elicited biographical information, self-evaluations of ability in Spanish and Kaqchikel, responses to questions about the importance of the languages in domains of community life, and observations about the choice of the two languages for use in the community and in the home and by family members. For Kaqchikel, the questionnaire included tests of knowledge of Kaqchikel vocabulary and of the ability to respond to conversational questions posed in Kaqchikel. The tests were created by two of our bilingual assistants.

Activities in the Home

To examine language choice in the context of the home we focused on responses from “indígenas” in the village and “indígenas” in the town. Nearly 100% of the “ladinos” in the town, that is, of the “ladinos” in the complete survey sample, excluding the two village students who declared themselves to be “ladino”, indicated that they use Spanish only in the home. The questionnaire asked “¿Qué lengua se usa para estas actividades?” ‘What language is used for these activities?’ The activities included were preparing meals, chores, eating meals, visits in the home, parties (fiestas), play and relaxation, listening to the radio, and praying. Participants could select the options of Kaqchikel, both Kaqchikel and Spanish, or Spanish reveal trends.

For Kaqchikel-only, Figure 1 lists the activities in order, from most frequently selected to least frequently, as given by village “indígenas”, except that prayer is given last. Even for village

“indígenas” nothing is very high for Kaqchikel-only; the responses range from 41% and 33%, for meal preparation and chores, respectively, to 4% for listening to the radio. Radio broadcasts are available primarily in Spanish although there are also brief religious broadcasts in Kaqchikel from small church-related stations. For town “indígenas”, the pattern for Kaqchikel-only in the context of these activities is very similar, but lower in all but one case, listening to the radio. Indigenous responses in the town are also notably lower for Kaqchikel-only for the daily activities of cooking, chores, and meals, and for prayer, which for many families is a meal-time prayer.

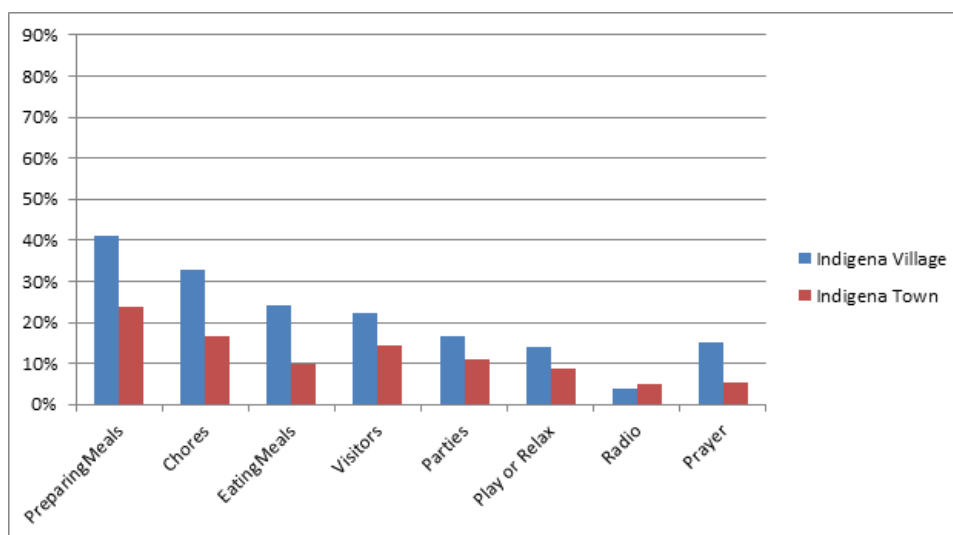


Figure 1: Kaqchikel-Only by Activities

Figure 2 shows that selection of both-Kaqchikel-and-Spanish by both village and town “indígenas” increases for eating meals, when multiple generations of the family are often present. For both groups, it is highest when visitors enter the home and for parties (fiestas) that often attract a diverse group of guests. For these activities, however, the selection of “both”, which includes Kaqchikel, is higher for village “indígenas” than for town “indígenas”.

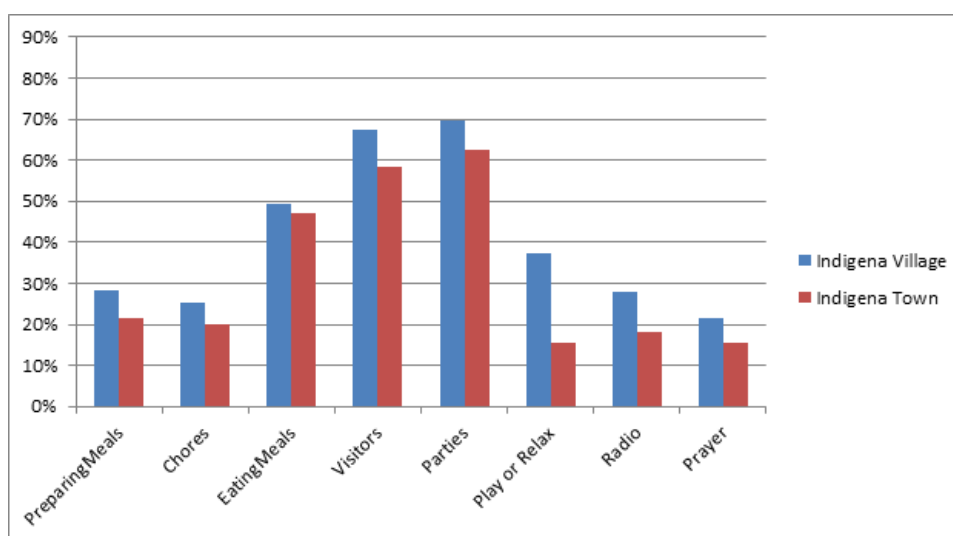


Figure 2: Both Kaqchikel and Spanish by Activities

The most revealing findings for activities in the home are seen in Figure 3. It shows that Spanish-only has been selected more often by town indigenous families across that board. For town “indígenas” relatively high reported use of Spanish-only also extends to the daily activities of meal preparation, chores, and eating meals. For town families, Spanish-only reaches the levels of 76%, 77%, and 79% for play or relaxation, listening to radio, and prayer; in the village Spanish-only is also very high in the last two cases.

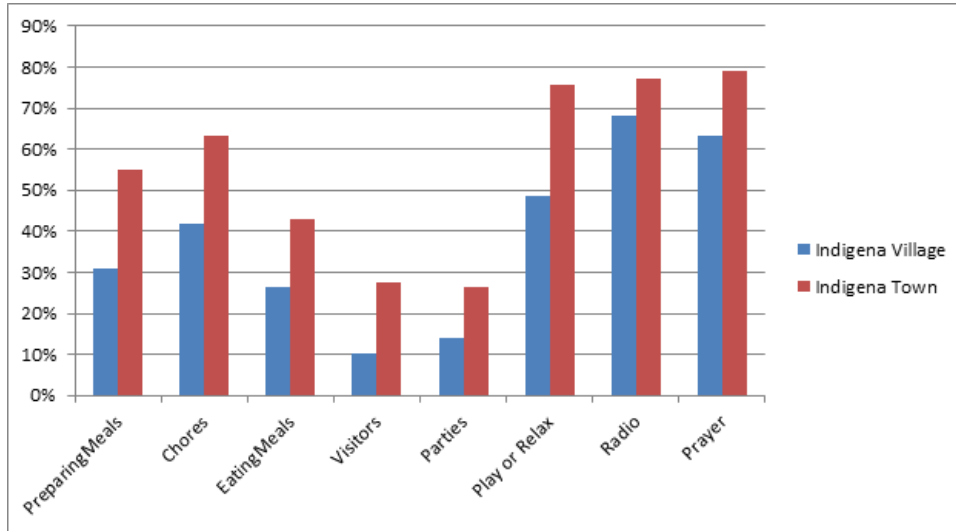


Figure 3: Spanish-Only by Activities

As determined by Chi-Square tests, the differences between village and town for language choice, i.e., choice of Kaqchikel-only, both-Kaqchikel-and-Spanish, or Spanish-only, by activity are statistically significant as shown by p-values in a range in a range of .000 to .042, except for parties and listening to the radio. For parties the difference is borderline and for listening to the radio, which is available primarily in Spanish, it is not significant.ⁱ

Language Choice in the Family

Here, to examine language use within the household, participants were asked to characterize language choice – the choice between Kaqchikel, Spanish, and both Spanish and Kaqchikel – by generations of speakers in their families. When grandparents were asked, they responded about themselves, about parents (their children) and children (their grandchildren). Parents responded about the grandparent generation (their parents), themselves, and their children. When children were asked, they responded about the children in their household, about their parents, and about their grandparents. Once again, ‘ladino’ subjects are not included in this analysis.

For the overall sample of 171 ‘indígenas’, the relationship between language choice in the home and the generation of the speaker is statistically significant, Chi-square (4) =168.6, $p < .001$.

Responses show clear patterns of language shift in the use of Kaqchikel, both Kaqchikel and Spanish, and Spanish across the generations, as may be seen in Figure 4.

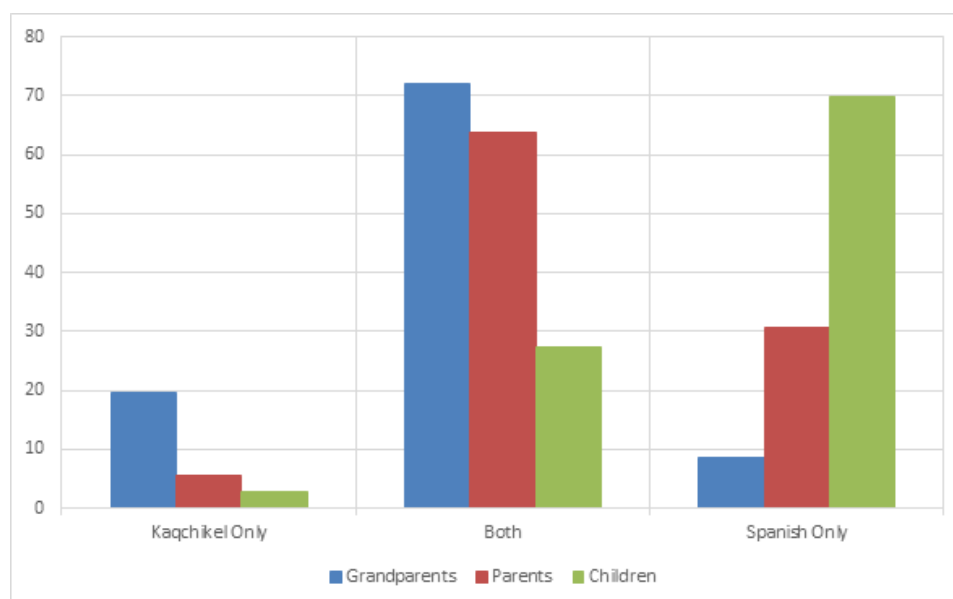


Figure 4: Language Use Across Generations

Reported use of Kaqchikel-only in the home drops from nearly 20% for grandparents, to only 6% for parents, and only 3% for children. Reported use of both-Kaqchikel-and-Spanish is much higher. It is 72% for grandparents, 64% for parents, and 27% for children. Reported use of Spanish-only in the home rises across the generations, from only 8% for grandparents to 30% for parents and 70% for children. These last results suggest the impact of the primarily Spanish-only education system on children, enrolled in levels through the 9th grade. For adults, the results for Spanish-only coincide with more limited time in the education system, parents rarely beyond the 6th grade and grandparents rarely beyond the 3rd grade. For children, the results for Spanish-only also coincide with greater exposure to Spanish-only in national media (TV and radio). Adults are characterized by more limited exposure to media, especially in their formative years, and, in the case of grandparents, by more limited exposure Spanish-dominant spheres in Guatemala.

Reported use of the languages in the home may also be viewed within the generations, for the village, with an almost exclusively indigenous population, and for the town, with a mixed ‘ladino’ and ‘indígena’ population. Figure 5 shows reported use of Kaqchikel-only, both-Kaqchikel-Spanish, and Spanish-only in the home for grandparents in the village and the town.

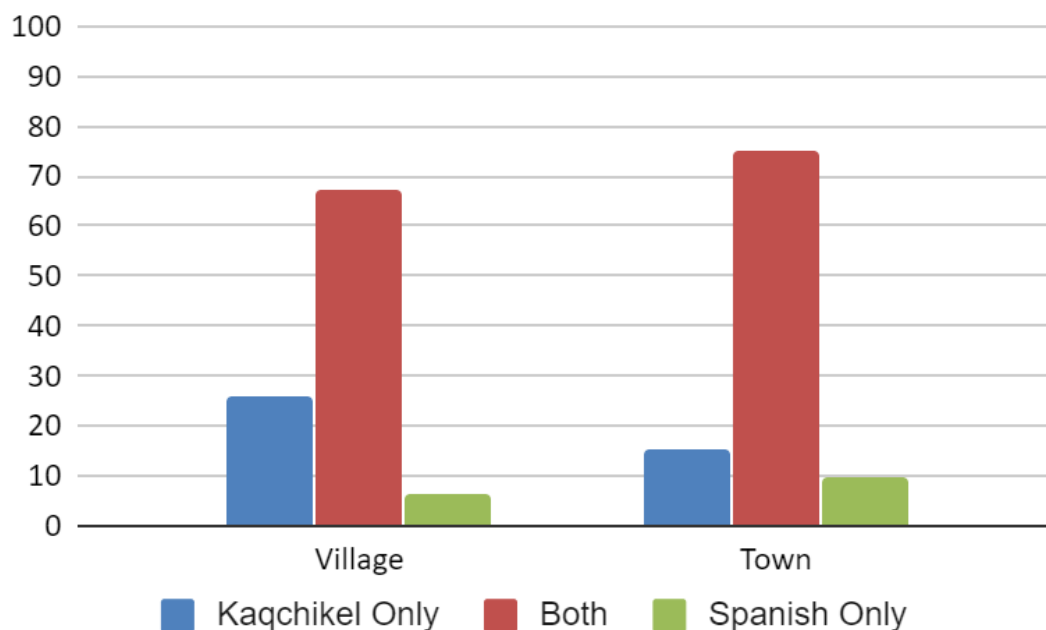


Figure 5: Language choice by grandparents in village and town

Reported use of Kaqchikel-only is not high, although for the village it is higher than for the town, 26% vs. 15%. Use of both-Kaqchikel-and-Spanish is high, although higher in the town, at 75%, than in the village, at 67%. Reported use of Spanish-only for grandparents is very low in both the village and town, only 7% in the village and 10% in the town. Overall, the picture reported for grandparents' language choice in the village and the town is similar and the differences are not statistically significant, Chi-square (2) =2.25, $p=.3251$. Nevertheless, significant differences are present for language choice in the home for the other generations in the village and the town.

There is a significant difference in reported parents' language choice in the village and the town, Chi-square (2) =26.06, $p<.001$.

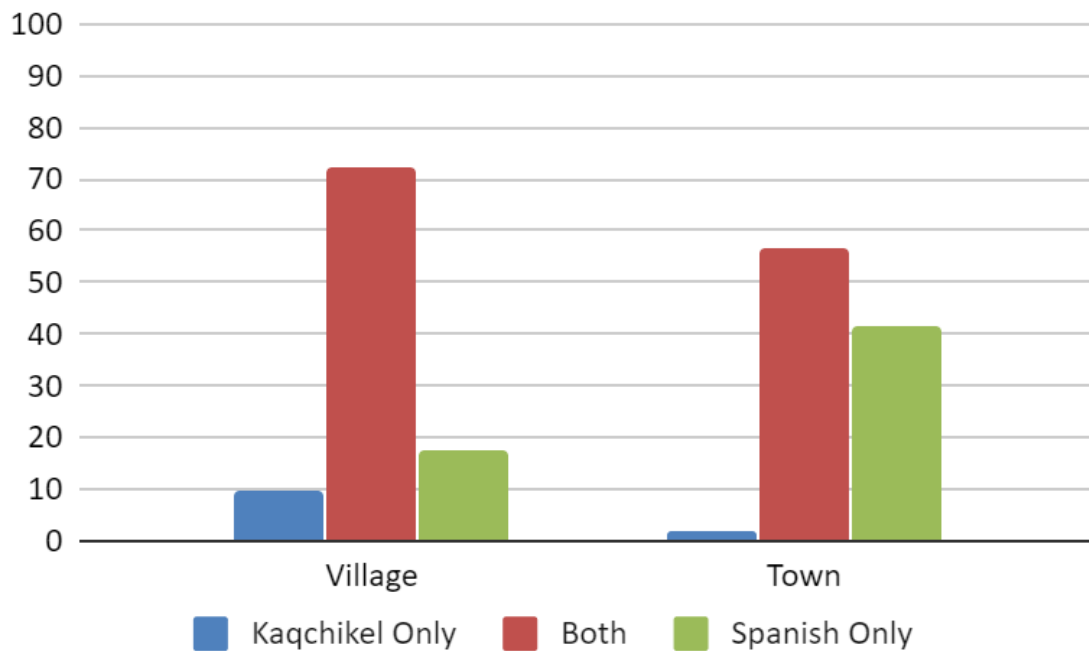


Figure 6: Language choice by parents in village and town

As is seen in Figure 6, responses indicate that indigenous parents' use of Kaqchikel-only is very low in both village and town; nevertheless, it is nearly 10% in the village vs. only 2% in the town. The strongest response for the parent generation in both village and town is "both". 72% of parents are reported to use both-Kaqchikel-and-Spanish in the village, while the percentage falls markedly to 56% in the town. Spanish-only responses are lowest, 18% in the village, but rise markedly in the town, where they are 42%. In the town, when this is broken down by gender, they reach 36% for "padres" and 47% for "madres". Use of both-Kaqchikel-and-Spanish is also least strong for town mothers, for whom responses showing use of Spanish-only are the highest among parents.

There is a significant difference in the language choice of children in the village and the town, Chi-square (2) =14.52, $p<.001$, and the picture painted in Figure 7 is striking. The results are for all children, middle-school age and higher, and younger children, primary age and lower.

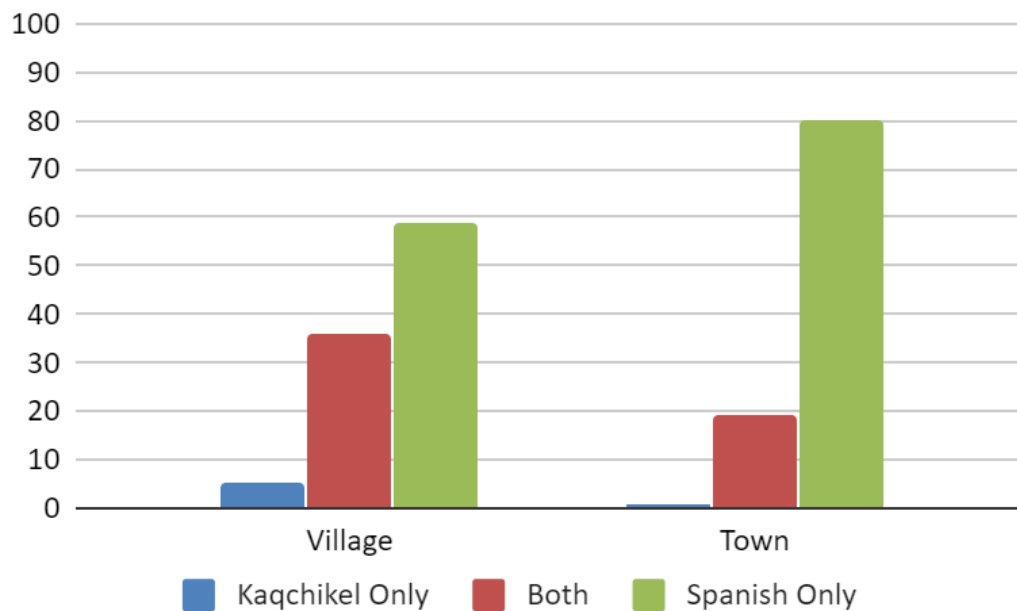


Figure 7: Language choice by children in village and town

Responses indicate that children most frequently use Spanish-only in the home. For the town, the Spanish-only response reaches 80%. In the village it is lower, although still 59%. Responses indicating use of both-Kaqchikel-and-Spanish are much lower for indigenous children than for grandparents and parents, but they are higher in the village, at 39%, than in the town, where they are 19%. Use of Kaqchikel-only in the home by children characterizes a very small minority in both village and town, 5% in the village, and only 1% in the town.

Parent Language Choice and Kaqchikel Assessments for Children

Responses about language choice by indigenous parents in the home, seen in Figure 5, have shown that use of both-Kaqchikel-and-Spanish is the most common option in both the village and the town. Responses suggesting use of Spanish-only are second and are strongest in the town. Responses suggesting use of Kaqchikel-only are much lower, especially for parents in the town, where they are only 1% for fathers and 2% for mothers. At this point, we will consider the effect of language choice by indigenous parents on the acquisition of Kaqchikel by their children.

90 indigenous students from both town and village combined responded about the language choice of their parents in the home. The ability of these students in Kaqchikel was also assessed using measures created by our bilingual Kaqchikel and Spanish speaking assistants. The assessment measures included measures for range of vocabulary knowledge and for the ability to respond to conversational questions in Kaqchikel. The measure of range of vocabulary consisted of 10 items focusing on the recognition of vocabulary items ranging from “tz’i” ‘dog’ and “mes” ‘cat’, at the easy end, to “si” ‘firewood’ and “tz’uj” ‘drop of water’, at the difficult end. Ability to provide a conversational response was gauged by using seven questions, including “Achike ab’i rat?” “What is your name?”, “E k’äs a te ‘a tata?”, ‘Are your mother and father living?’, and

“Achike rikil üt z nana’ rat?”, ‘What kind of food do you like?’ Results have been given in terms of percentages of appropriate responses, as judged by our assistants.

Here, percentages of appropriate responses for vocabulary and conversation are linked to parent language choice broken down five ways as follows: both parents use Kaqchikel-only, one uses Kaqchikel-only and one uses both, both parents use both languages, one parent uses both and one uses Spanish-only, and both use Spanish-only. The results presented in Figure 8 are not surprising. What may be surprising is the regularity of the effect on both passive knowledge of vocabulary and active ability to respond to conversation in Kaqchikel.

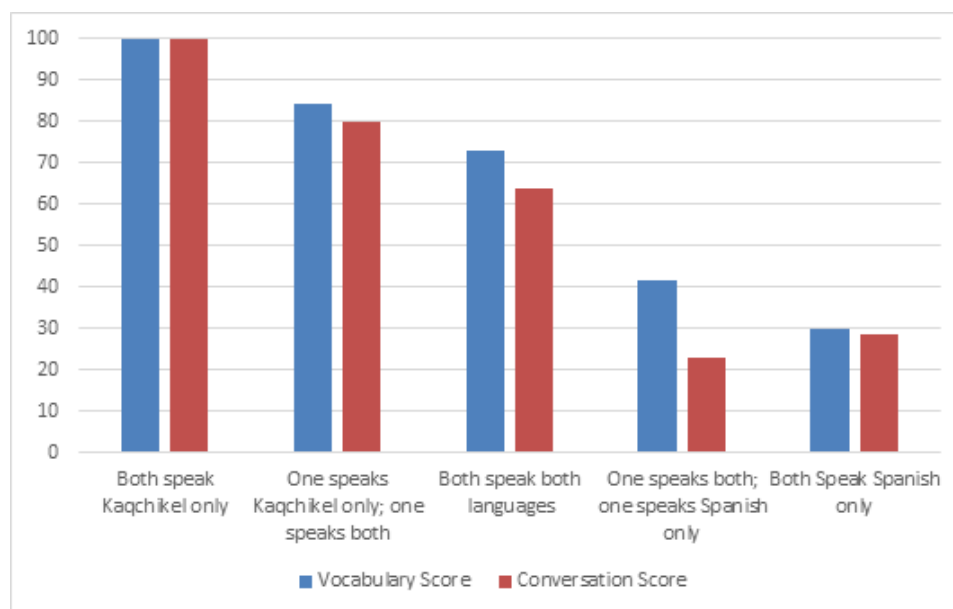


Figure 8: Vocabulary Range and Conversational Response by Two-Parent Language Choice for Children

When both parents choose Kaqchikel, children’s scores are 100% for both measures. For range of vocabulary knowledge and conversational response, the results drop to 84% and 80%, respectively, when one parent chooses Kaqchikel and one chooses both. They drop to 73% and 64% when both parents choose both languages. The drop-offs are more dramatic when one parent chooses Spanish and one chooses both languages, to 41% and 23% for vocabulary range and conversational response. When both choose Spanish, the results drop to 30% and 29%. Complete regularity in the drop-off is lost for conversational response when one parent uses both and one uses Spanish. Statistical analyses of the correlations between the results of the two measures of knowledge of Kaqchikel with the language choices of the parents are statistically significant: Vocabulary Range, $r=.509$, $p=.01$ and Conversational Response, $r=.448$, $p=.01$.

These results suggest that the effects of language choice by indigenous parents on the learning of Kaqchikel by their children are very real. Figure 5, which showed language choice by indigenous parents in village and town, showed that Spanish-only is greatest in the town. It is there where the negative effect of language choice on Kaqchikel should be greatest. Our 2012

study of maintenance and loss in samples of students at all grade levels from the town and the village shows that this, indeed, is the case (Holmquist and Muzika Kahn 2012).

Conclusion

The picture that has been presented here for language choice is complex. Diglossia, the clear separation of languages in relation to spheres or functions in a bilingual community, is not present. Language shift, which is three-way, from Kaqchikel, to both Kaqchikel and Spanish, and then Spanish, is clearly present and is reflected in indigenous speakers' perceptions of language use for activities in the home and by family members. Kaqchikel-only has been chosen most frequently for use for cooking and doing chores and is reported more for grandparents than parents or children. Use of both Spanish-and-Kaqchikel is frequently recognized for interaction between the generations at mealtime and when visitors come to the home and for fiestas, and is characteristic, especially, of indigenous parents in the village. Spanish is the language of choice most frequently for the media (as represented by radio) but also play, or relaxation, and prayer, and for indigenous children and with growing frequency for indigenous parents in the town. Language choice by indigenous parents has also been shown to affect the Kaqchikel language skills of indigenous children in direct relation to how these choices affect the availability of Kaqchikel in the home.

In their book *Rutojtaixik ri Maya' B'anob'al / Activismo Cultural Maya*, which is a case study of language maintenance, shift, and revitalization in San Antonio Aguas Calientes, a community in the Kaqchikel region, Fisher and McKenna Brown (1999: 213) make the following observation about Kaqchikel Maya and Spanish:

Los padres aceptan con facilidad el valor de la continuidad intergeneracional de los idiomas mayas. Lo que se necesita actualmente es una guía para criar y educar hijos bilingües ... necesitan sugerencias específicas en cuanto a la forma de distribuir los dos idiomas en la vida hogareña.

'Parents accept with ease the value of the intergenerational continuity of Mayan languages. What is needed currently is a guide to raise and educate bilingual children ... (parents) need specific suggestions on how to distribute the two languages in the life of the home.'

Our assessment (Holmquist and Muzika Kahn 2017: 18-20) of vocabulary knowledge and the ability to respond to conversation in Kaqchikel shows average scores of 90% for the former and 95% for the latter for the parents surveyed in the village of Parrojas and nearly 80% for the former and 93% for the latter for parents surveyed in the town of Parramos. For indigenous parents, knowledge of and the ability to speak Kaqchikel exist. What may be needed is education to reinforce the value of Kaqchikel, as what Briceño Chel (2021) in his essay on Yucatan Maya describes as "nuestro patronimio" 'our patrimony':

“... cuando la persona valora su lengua y la mira como parte de su riqueza personal, de su identidad, de su ser como individuo y como parte integrante de una comunidad de habla”;

‘... when the person values his language and views it as part of his personal wealth, of his identity, of his being as an individual and as an integral part of a speech community’.

As is suggested by our research here, equally important for the acquisition of Kaqchikel by youth may be education to provide guidance for choosing and using Kaqchikel in the home.

Our research on language choice and acquisition in the years following the 2003 Guatemala National Languages Law and the establishment of the government Department of Bilingual Intercultural Education (DIGEBI) suggests that while the inclusion of Kaqchikel instruction in schools in the communities studied here has led to greater acceptance of and respect for the language and culture, there is still a need to fully implement the language policies for linguistic equality. This includes the education system, government policies, radio and television broadcasts, and community support. In the education system, Kaqchikel instructional materials provided to schools by DIGEBI are limited to Kindergarten/First Grade, despite the requirement that Kaqchikel is taught to all grades. Consequently, neither teachers nor students have Kaqchikel textbooks after 1st grade unless they can afford to buy privately published materials. Also, parents, who are usually not literate in Kaqchikel, need support to encourage their children to study and speak Kaqchikel in everyday life and at home. In schools, according to the Academy of Maya Languages of Guatemala (ALMG) and the Kaqchikel Linguistic Community (CLK), DIGEBI is not following a 2004 agreement that ALMG provide certification for teachers in oral and written Kaqchikel, with the result that unqualified teachers are teaching Kaqchikel, as we observed in our school visits. The ALMG and CLK offer in-person and online Kaqchikel classes in Chimaltenango, but these are not accessible to the general population, particularly in view of the limited internet access in rural communities. There is also concern that television and radio programs are to a very large extent only in Spanish, as noted in our research as well, and a recent lawsuit by the Kaqchikel People of Sumpango states that the Guatemalan State has placed limits on local radio stations’ access to radio frequency, so that Kaqchikel communities are deprived of equal access to broadcasts in their own language. All these factors impact the family and community lifestyle of Kaqchikel speakers and need to be addressed to provide community and institutional support for the equitable maintenance of and pride in Kaqchikel culture and language in future generations.

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Hana Muzika Kahn. Professor of Spanish literature and Latin American Studies with research focusing on bilingual literature, based on research carried out in Guatemala. Particularly interested in the maintenance and revitalization of indigenous languages. She is Managing Editor of Yax Te' Books <https://yaxtebooks.info/> which publishes books by Guatemalan Maya authors, and is the translator of recent works by Q'anjob'al writer, Gaspar Pedro González, including the *Xumakil; Botón en Flor / Budding*; and *Un Maya Migrante / A Maya Migrant*.

i

Pearson Chi-Square tests for activities by village and town

Preparing Meals	10.385 ^a	2	.006
Chores	8.778 ^a	2	.012
Eating Meals	8.361 ^a	2	.015
Visitors	8.191 ^a	2	.017
Parties	4.431 ^a	2	.109
Play or Relax	13.408 ^a	2	.001
Radio	2.213 ^a	2	.331
Prayer	6.324 ^a	2	.042